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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to assess resident student satisfaction with the facilities, services, communications, staff, and programs offered by the Office of Housing and Residence Life of Auburn University (Alabama.) Campus ecology theory and A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs were used to interpret findings. A systematic random sample of 349 students was surveyed using a 28-item questionnaire. Nine independent variables were loaded into a linear regression equation to extract those predictors believed to significantly affect the quality of residence life. The analysis indicated that cleanliness, safety, residence hall programs and activities, and opportunities to provide input to decision making in the hall were the significant predictors of student satisfaction within this residential community, and that 41% of the variance in student satisfaction could be explained by these four variables. Includes 19 references. (Author/DB)

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The Quality of Residence Life at Auburn University

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Auburn University

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association Chicago, April, 1991

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Abstract

Students' perceptions of the environmental conditions of their residence halls have far-reaching implications for residence hall staff. The purpose of this research study is to assess resident student satisfaction with respect to the facilities, services, communications, staff, and programs offered by Auburn's Office of Housing and Residence Life. Campus ecology theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs are used as bases for understanding the nature of residence life. A systematic random sample of Auburn residents surveyed 349 students using a 28-item questionnaire that addressed student satisfaction with residential facilities, programming, staff, policy, and safety. Descriptive statistics and a linear regression analysis answered why students choose the on-campus housing option, and what factors positively and negatively impact the quality of residence life. Satisfaction with residence life points in part to cleanliness, safety, programming, and decision-making opportunities. Once safe, livable conditions are provided, Auburn resident students are likely to appreciate educational programming, and press for self-management and decision-making opportunities.

The Quality of Residence Life at Auburn University

Introduction

Student affairs administrators are increasingly concerned with the social ecology of student residence hall environments in an era of dwindling enrollments and restricted financial resources. Assessments of how students perceive their living environments, and how they make decisions about where to live, are important in determining whether or not residence life contributes to or detracts from students' learning and growth in college.

Students' perceptions of the environmental conditions of their residence halls have far-reaching implications for residence life administrators, who seek to provide environments which enhance students' academic and social development. To what extent do the physical facilities and educational programs in the halls actually contribute to students' learning and development? And to what extent do the services and programs offered by departments of residence life promote a developmental environment? Such questions are increasingly important in a time of unprecedented competition for students' living options at Auburn University.

Purpose of the study

Because of an off-campus real estate development boom, Auburn University campus housing competes with privately owned dormitories, luxury condominiums, spacious duplexes, private

homes, nearby efficiency apartments, and convenient trailer parks. If the university is to attract traditional-aged undergraduate and graduate students to campus residence halls, then it must offer competitive cost, well-trained staff, and high quality facilities, services, and programs. The stated mission of Auburn Housing and Residence Life goes beyond full occupancy to that of offering a superior quality of life for both graduate and undergraduate students, in order to remain a competitive living option.

The purpose of this research study is to assess resident student satisfaction regarding the facilities, services, communication, staff, and programs offered by Auburn's Office of Housing and Residence Life. As in the Madson, Kuder, and Thompson (1974), and the Stoner and Moss (1982) studies, the study's objective is to evaluate prevailing resident student concerns in terms of the following: rendering buildings safe and comfortable; updating existing facilities; maintaining a trained staff; and instituting timely and effective educational programs, policies, and services, thus meeting students' overall need for a satisfying campus living environment.

Theoretical Framework

Campus ecology theory provides a means by which to understand the nature of residence life, and to determine the basis for quality within the campus living environment. The university as an ecosystem considers the environmental impact of

the campus and its effect on college student behavior (Baird, 1978; Feldman, 1969). Over the last 20-25 years, the mission of residence life has shifted from that of controlling, servicing, housing, and feeding to that of promoting student growth and development. Kaiser (1975) believes that "improving the quality of student life depends upon improving the quality of the campus environment" (p. 33). He adds that the physical and social spaces within the campus environment trigger student growth, self-awareness, and meaningful personal and social experiences.

Schroeder and Jackson (1987) assert that residential environments can be designed and managed to foster student development. Latta (1984) feels that physical conditions and quality of residence facilities can positively or negatively impact educational development. His study found that most Michigan State University students viewed their living environment as a positive force in their successful integration into campus life. Terenzini and Pascarella (1982) add that the context or character of the living unit can influence student behavior, especially with regard to student persistence and grade performance. Moos (1975) found evidence that different clusters of living groups had different impacts on students. According to Corozzini and White (1977), environments designed to reduce dysfunctional stress enhance the student's quality of life.

Although Maslow's (1970) theory centers on individual rather than environmental factors, his hierarchy of needs provides a theoretical framework for understanding personal growth and

development in humans. It is quite applicable to generalized objectives for college student housing programs, because in order for personal development to have direction, human needs must be understood. Maslow states that the goal of education should be an affirmative response to life, to one's self, and to one's environment. Physiological needs represent the most basic condition in his hierarchy of satisfaction, followed by safety needs, or a desire for consistency; fairness, routine, and freedom from harm. Next, belongingness needs exist through the establishment of guidelines that provide structure for compatible and cooperative community living. Esteem needs are described as the desire for self-respect and respect for others. Lastly, opportunities for continued student growth and development help the student to reach a point of self-actualization.

Wills (1974) found that, in general, female students were more dissatisfied with their living arrangements than male students. Males exhibiting lower levels of self-actualization were more likely to seek out residence facilities with greater security, structure, and support. Conroy (1982) discovered from a factor analysis that key variables contributing to the quality of residence life include maintenance and prompt repair, properly functioning utilities, and regular custodial services. In fact, concern for basic services preceded students' concerns for social factors and personal growth.

Banning (1989) apprises the impact of the housing situation in terms of the tremendous ecological transition as the student

moves from the familiar home situation to a campus setting. There is a tendency for students to compare critically their creature comforts across environments.

In a study of residence hall environments, Latta (1984) indicates that most students characterize their residence halls as "a supportive, active, educational environment... where the resident assistant has shown interest,...their floor was quiet,...[they had] adequate study space,...[and held a] huge degree of ownership in the floor community" (p. 371). Janosik, Creamer, and Cross (1988) examined the relationship between student-environment fit and a sense of competence and determined "that residence life should provide greater emotional support and greater involvement of students in governance" (p. 322).

Stoner and Moss (1982) found that satisfaction differed by academic class and type of accommodation. In a study of Hampshire College, Kegan (1978) saw student satisfaction stem from positive notions of academic progress, and of not feeling isolated on campus. Data gathered by Madson, Kuder, and Thompson (1974) indicate that quality of life means modification of educational programs, facilities, staff functions, and food quality. In a quality of life study at Indiana University, Bradley et al., (1986) found residents quite pleased with their environment as a result of programs and activities, residence hall staff, auxiliary services, study conditions, safety and security measures, and information dissemination.

Methodology

Participants and Demographics

During the 1989-90 academic year, Auburn residence hall occupancy reached 2,823 graduate and undergraduate students in twenty-two campus facilities. Student names were arranged alphabetically by individual hall and campus location--Hill, Quad, Noble, and two apartment villages. To ensure representation across campus, the researchers used a systematic random sampling technique, and selected every fifth resident student to participate in The Quality of Auburn Residence Life Study. With the assistance of residence hall directors and resident assistants, 570 designated participants received a hand-delivered, uncoded questionnaire in May, 1990, and were asked to return the completed instrument to their hall director or resident assistant.

Three hundred forty-nine usable questionnaires were returned before the close of the academic year. A 61% return rate included a representative sampling of the overall Auburn resident student population. As shown in Table 1, respondents consisted of 64% female and 36% male residents; 72% underclassmen, 22% upperclassmen, and 6% graduates; and 47% Greek affiliated and 53% independents. Sixty percent of the residents had lived in the halls for only one year. For the purpose of analysis, the residence halls were categorized as the newly renovated Hill community (27%); the older, more traditional Quad and Noble communities (40%); and the apartment commmunities (33%).

Instrumentation

The researchers chose to use a somewhat modified version of the 65-item Quality of Life Survey used by The University of North Carolina to evaluate its resident housing facilities, services, and programs (Kuncl, 1988). This survey sampled resident's perceptions of the effectiveness and quality of such areas as communication, security, community atmosphere, and physical facilities, as well as reasons for living on campus. The survey was used as a tool for long-range planning within the department. The revised questionnaire incorporated some of these fundamental factors, but the content was adapted specifically to represent the uniqueness of the Auburn residence life community, and the special offerings of the Department of Housing and Residence Life.

The printed survey instrument consisted of 28 items, including the following: five demographic variables assessing gender, class standing, Greek affiliation, residence community, and length of residence; general questions on housing choice, study habits, residence life activities and scaff, and policy; and five-point Likert Scale questions (very satisfied to very dissatisfied) covering student satisfaction with programs, facilities, staff, communications, policies, regulations, safety, security, and cleanliness. Nearly all forced choice questions offered additional space to enable respondents to clarify any negative responses, and to offer suggestions for improvement. Finally, two open-ended questions asked participants to identify

the single greatest problem affecting the quality of residence life at Auburn, and secondly, to make specific suggestions or recommendations for improving their residence hall or apartment.

By gathering a random sample of participants representative of the Auburn resident student population, content validity was addressed and achieved. In an effort to achieve construct validity, the Auburn questionnaire was modeled similarly to the University of North Carolina instrument, which was believed to cover those areas indicative of resident students, and all aspects typical of residence life programs on similar campuses. An internal reliability coefficient of .61 on the data set implies at least a moderate to good level of test item consistency.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics identified basic demographic trends, and chi square tests ($p < .05$) established significant relationships between specific variables. A content analysis was made from the two open-ended questions pertaining to problematic areas and issues, and student suggestions for their improvement.

A linear regression analysis (SPSSx) analyzed data to determine what factors impact the quality of residence life by identifying the best predictors of resident student satisfaction (dependent variable) for the sample group tested. The nine independent variables chosen from the Likert Scale questions were: hall cleanliness, safety, residence hall regulations, the quality and the type of communications received from the staff,

helpfulness of the paraprofessional staff, quality of residence hall programs, perceived academic value of these programs, and opportunities for student input into decision-making.

The data were gathered specifically to address the following three research questions: (1) What do Auburn students perceive as their reasons for choosing on-campus housing as a living option?; (2) What environmental flaws have been identified by these resident students as negatively impacting the quality of residence life?; (3) What factors have been identified by the residents as contributing to their positive overall satisfaction with the quality of residence life?

Results

This study enabled the respondents to evaluate the physical environment of their residence hall or apartment; to assess the value of its services and programs; to comment on the effectiveness and helpfulness of the paraprofessional staff; to determine the effectiveness of internal communication; to judge the effectiveness of hall policies, procedures, and regulations; and to comment anonymously on what contributes to individual satisfaction and the overall quality of residence life on the Auburn campus.

On-campus living options

Most respondents reported that they resided on campus primarily because of the convenient location and the services offered by the residential community (39%). Because of sorority membership, 20% of the sample chose to be housed with their

affiliation. Referring to a newly renovated hall, one woman wrote that, "Dobbs Hall tries to bring everyone together to make the dorm a second family."

One third of the participants indicated a plan to return to on-campus housing for another year. As illustrated in Table 2, females were more likely than males to so indicate, and sorority members were more likely than independents to seek campus housing. Respondents in the newly renovated Hill halls were most likely to desire to return than were residents in the older facilities.

Respondents across all living areas recorded various levels of involvement in residence life-sponsored events and hall council meetings. Eighty-four percent of the respondents attended one function, 42% attended two functions, and 22% attended three or more functions. Groups exhibiting the highest levels of satisfaction in educational programming and meetings were females, freshmen, independents, and those living in the Hill and Quad communities. The data shown in Table 2 indicate that the longer residents stay in an on-campus facility, the lower their level of involvement and the less satisfied they become with the educational programming.

Ninety percent of all participants expressed at least some satisfaction with the verbal communication and written information distributed by the residence life staff. Most residents (79%) surveyed reported being somewhat-to-very satisfied with the opportunities they had to provide input into

the decision-making aspects of residential living. Greeks expressed higher levels of satisfaction with decision-making opportunities than independents (See Table 2).

While most residents expressed satisfaction with the lines of communication from the Housing and Residence Life Office, 38% desired more resource information about the university outside the residential community. Males were more likely than females to want more explanation of specific housing policies and procedures (See Table 2). Residents in all residential communities reported that their resident assistants were, to at least some extent, both available and helpful in addressing their specific needs and concerns (93%).

According to 85% of the sample, the campus environment was perceived as a safe place to live; however, the Hill and Quad residents felt safer than residents of the other communities. Several residents who felt unsafe suggested better lighting, more security patrols, and starting an escort service. One Noble Hall resident believed that "residents are not informed about health and safety issues that occur on campus, such as rapes, assaults, and break-ins."

Clearly 71% of the respondents rated their facility as a satisfactory living option. In fact, females, Greeks, and long-term residents reported that they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their overall living arrangements (59%). One female student summarized her perceptions when she said, "You have to adjust to a lot of aspects you're not used to, but the

friends you meet and the opportunities you have (educational programs, hall council, socials) far outweigh the disadvantages."

Negative impact of the environment

Aging facilities and maintenance concerns were mentioned with some degree of frequency on questionnaires from the older, traditional residence halls. The problematic areas as drawn from the content analysis included: air-conditioning, heating, pests, carpeting, dust, fixtures, garbage, grounds, leaky pipes, lighting, mold, mildew, plumbing, radiators, rust, ventilation, water, and windows. One resident decried that the "lack of respect for the building" shows that "the students have been treating it like a dump, not our home." Sixty-five percent of the residents living in older halls planned to seek alternative housing the following year. A student who perceived a high turnover rate among residents observed that as a result, it made "it hard to build a community in each hall ... year to year."

Residents living in the recently-renovated Hill community were most likely to be among the on-campus returnees. Occupants in these areas were more likely to indicate problems such as noise, privacy, quiet hours, roommate troubles, smoking policy, mail service, and information flow.

Residents living in the on-campus apartment perceived similar problems expressed by the Quad and Noble communities, such as the need for renovation and cleanliness, as well as a need "to control unruly residents and their sophomoric pranks." Because more graduate and/or married students reside in the

apartment villages, their basic concerns also included the need for car pools, play areas for children, support groups, quiet hours, and smaller or fewer rent increases.

Those students moving off-campus expressed an interest in seeking more privacy (39%) and greater independence (24%). Another resident analyzed the dilemma when she said that "It's so hard to study and get quiet time and privacy, but then again, when you decide to live in a dorm, you decide to face these problems."

Overall student satisfaction

Nine independent variables were loaded into a linear regression equation in order to extract those predictors believed to significantly affect the quality of residence life at Auburn University. The regression analysis indicated that cleanliness, safety, hall programs and activities, and opportunities to provide input into decision-making in the hall were the significant predictors of student satisfaction within this particular residential community. With a Multiple R of .64 and an r squared of .41, the statistics indicated that 41% of the variance in student satisfaction with their quality of residence life could be explained by these four independent variables.

Discussion

The results of the Auburn Residence Life Study lend insight into the overall quality of residence life in an area where off-campus development and fierce competition pose a significant

threat to full hall occupancy and, ultimately, program quality. While the professional and paraprofessional staff strives to implement and maintain health and safety standards and offer meaningful programs and activities for residents, they also must address high resident turnover and determine ways to encourage student retention in the halls.

The university's five-year master plan for facilities and maintenance has witnessed the razing of two antiquated dormitories, and the subsequent construction of classroom buildings, recreational facilities, and a hotel and conference center. Recent major renovation projects at Auburn demonstrate the university's attention to students' physiological needs as a pre-condition for intellectual and emotional satisfaction. The university attends to residents' safety needs through adequate care and maintenance of its physical facilities. A major effort to promote security within the residential system emphasizes room, fire, and tornado safety, as well as theft and crime protection.

Since the linear regression was only able to explain 41% of the variance, what other factors are involved in the reasoning behind students' choosing residence halls as a living option? First, campus policy directs that sorority women affiliate with a particular on-campus hall instead of a private, off-campus house. Second, parents of Auburn freshmen have traditionally encouraged or insisted that their offspring live in the campus residential facilities.

However, a considerable number of independents, upperclassmen, and graduate students fill the remaining rooms. What, then, contributes to their satisfaction? One apartment complex caters to international students and their families. Students without a car or an orientation to the college town perhaps view residence life as their best option. Several halls house homogeneous groupings of majors; the engineering students, housed in one traditional residence hall, probably benefit both academically and professionally from constant contact with each other. Indeed, the residence life mission statement speaks to its commitment to building a strong sense of community within its halls through hall policies, hall councils, unit agreements, and educational programming. Residence Life attempts to intentionally facilitate the creation of living-learning residential communities. The common interests shared by the groups in these examples lend support to the retention factor discussed by Terenzini and Pascarella (1982).

Also linked to college retention is involvement in campus activities (Astin, 1984). However, in this case, hall affiliation and length of stay are not strengthened by increased opportunity for involvement in residence hall programs, activities, and council meetings. A newly completed main library building, usually filled to capacity on weeknights, may explain low attendance at some residence hall programs, as would weekly sorority meetings. Student involvement in clubs and extracurricular activities, and competition from student

activities programming, also impinge on personal time. Attendance at programs may be topic-specific, as dictated by subject/issue popularity, freshman curiosity, or perceived personal relevance. As predicted, seminars on such topics as acquaintance rape have been better attended than those programs concerning time and stress management or study skills.

Attracted to this serene, rural campus setting are significant numbers of students from middle and upper class socio-economic backgrounds (evidenced by student cars, dress, accouterments, and allowances). Based on Banning's (1989) assessment of the gap between home and hall, many Auburn residents are perhaps overwhelmed, and often appalled, at their new surroundings relative to their permanent residences. Thus, residence halls may be in better physical condition than students indicate.

The data support the Stoner and Moss (1982) premise that type of accommodation affects satisfaction and quality of life, i.e., better quality facilities affect turnover rates. An assessment of the basic features of this residential campus environment indicate that physical comfort and safety concerns take precedence over social and academic factors, as expressed through Maslow's needs hierarchy and in the Conroy (1982) study.

While each community had similar problems, certain problems remain situation-specific. For instance, the needs of Auburn's married residents stretch beyond the personal creature comforts to include spouse and child care needs. Less easily supervised,

these apartment villages, while affording a greater amount of personal freedom, also facilitate greater degrees of isolation and loneliness within the total campus environment, especially for freshmen. This fact should not be overlooked among residents' reasons for moving off-campus.

However, opportunities for self-governance and involvement in decision-making and policy development affect hall pride, and contribute to ownership in the hall community as supported in the study by Janosik, et al. (1988). Furthermore, Auburn's Residence Life program attempts to develop an interpersonal environment reflecting responsible citizenship, and a concern for the welfare of others. The department continues to revise its judicial procedures for disciplinary cases, and emphasizes basic communication and conflict resolution between residents and paraprofessional staff. Judging from the written responses and the chi square relationships (Table 2), students prefer the responsibility of self-management, hall contracts, and having pride and a vested interest in their hall and residential community.

The perceived quality of paraprofessional staff must be addressed. Current efforts by residence life professionals include careful selection and training of resident assistants and hall directors, who then complete a credit course specifically designed and taught for them by designated faculty. A confluence of a working knowledge of issues facing university students, programming skills, and appreciation for individual differences

are emphasized in order to promote maximum student development opportunities within the residential communities. Programming skills, including assessing, planning, publicizing, implementing, and evaluating are taught to resident assistants with a view toward establishing positive residential environments conducive to learning. Bradley et al (1986) found similar results through the Indiana studies.

With the aid of evaluations, comments, the Auburn Housing and Residence Life staff will continue to contribute to the overall quality of campus life. The results of the survey permit both staff and students to cooperatively shape and influence the total campus residential environment. If the Auburn quality of residence life is to be broadly satisfactory, the study indicates the immediate need to press for safe, livable conditions in all Auburn residential facilities, so that students can focus on more selective programming efforts and the possibilities of student self-management.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics (n=349)

Demographic variables	%
Gender	
Male	36
Female	64
Class Rank	
Freshman	42
Sophomore	30
Junior	16
Senior	6
Graduate	6
Affiliation	
Independent	53
Sorority	38
Fraternity	9
Residential Community	
Old traditional halls-Noble, Quad	40
Newly renovated halls-Hill	27
Apartment complexes	33
Terms Living in Residence Halls	
1 - 3	60
4 - 6	22
7 or more	18

Table 2

Chi Square Relationships between Select Variables

	Demographics				
	Gender	Class	Affiliation	Residence	Terms
Variable	X^2	X^2	X^2	X^2	X^2
On-campus choice	24.94***	103.09***	91.05***	98.91***	96.91***
Residential choice	29.38***	20.56	99.43***	52.79***	18.45
Involvement in activities	10.02*	26.48*	28.11**	38.76**	28.03**
Satisfied with activities	17.02*	16.88	22.77*	45.10***	24.64*
Programming preferences	8.07	24.60	23.52*	24.22	13.88
Satisfied with information	5.65	32.94*	23.21**	26.97*	19.73
Decision-making opportunities	11.14*	16.83	24.52*	27.15*	24.63*
Satisfied with communications	9.90*	16.90	16.86*	19.08	21.50*
Satisfied with policy/rules	10.99*	12.09	16.91*	34.57*	15.69
Safety factor	4.36	32.84*	9.25	16.15	23.92*
Cleanliness factor	19.44**	33.02*	34.22***	14.20***	14.69
Overall satisfaction	18.76**	18.29	23.66*	59.04***	14.17

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Table 3

Linear Regression Analysis of Student Satisfaction with the Quality of Auburn Residence Life

Independent Variables	Beta	Correlation	F	Sig of F
Satisfaction with cleanliness	.2561	.4990	38.05	.0000
Satisfaction with programs and activities	.2690	.4943	28.42	.0000
Satisfaction with safety and security	.1903	.3019	13.54	.0003
Satisfaction with decision-making opportunities	.1691	.4021	12.31	.0005

Multiple r = .64

R squared = .41

F = 52.152

p = .0000